

FET IN FOCUS 2024

A STUDY INTO  
YOUTHREACH  
PROVISION IN  
IRELAND

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FET IN FOCUS:  
YOUTHREACH

**SOLAS**  
learning works

Further  
Education  
& Training



All data is sourced from the Programme and Learner Support Systems (PLSS) database. PLSS collects and processes the personal data of the FET learners who are enrolled in SOLAS funded programmes. Please note that apprenticeship and eCollege data are not included in this report.

The National FET Statistics, Data and Insights Unit would like to acknowledge the assistance of the ETB staff involved in submitting data to SOLAS.

# Contents

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Key Findings.....	4
Introduction.....	5
1. Learner Profile.....	8
2. Course Profile.....	12
3. Geographical Distribution of Learners.....	16
4. Outcomes: Pathways beyond Youthreach.....	20
Conclusion.....	22
Definition of Terms.....	24

# Key Findings

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- > The number of unique learner enrolments has remained relatively stable between 2018 and 2022, falling by 5% in this period, despite the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- > 72% of enrolments were on courses at Level 4, Level 4/5 (Leaving Certificate) or Level 5 Certificates.
- > Of the 4,236 learner enrolments in 2022, 2,454 were full or partial completions of a Youthreach course (the remainder comprising those who were still 'on course' at the end of 2022 and those who were early leavers).
- > Of the 2,454 learners who were full or partial completers of a course in Youthreach in 2022, 929 learners (38%) started another FET course after leaving Youthreach by the end of 2023, and 53% of these courses were PLCs.
- > The certification rate was 78%, which is higher than the 2022 national average over all FET programmes of 71%.
- > Of those learners who provided information on their ethnicity, 71% identified as white Irish, 13% as an Irish Traveller and 2% as Roma.
- > Using the Pobal HP deprivation index, we found that Youthreach learners in 2022 were almost four times more likely to come from very or extremely disadvantaged areas than the general Irish population.
- > The median distance travelled by all learners to their Youthreach centre was 2.5km, with four Youthreach centres having a median distance travelled by learners of over 20km. The maximum median distance travelled was to Portumna Youthreach at 26.9km.

# Introduction

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The Youthreach programme was established in 1989 to provide second-chance education for young people who leave mainstream secondary education before sitting the Leaving Certificate examination. The Youthreach programme is primarily a full-time classroom-based programme, delivered at Youthreach centres and Community Training Centres nationwide. This report is carried out to give insight into the Youthreach learners' profile enrolled at Youthreach centres and their journey through education and training, as well as assessing their outcomes<sup>1</sup>.

A report from the Department of Education Inspectorate<sup>2</sup> (August, 2024) highlighted the high levels of satisfaction of parents and young people with the Youthreach programme. Of particular note was the commitment of staff to improving learner's self-belief, fostering an ambitious outlook and helping them reach their potential. This is particularly important since Youthreach learners often reported negative experiences in mainstream education.

The inspectorate's report did highlight some persistent challenges for the Youthreach programme. Among these are attendance (the report acknowledged that the reasons for poor attendance can be complex) and the effective facilitation of literacy and numeracy skills. The report also highlighted the need for each centre to have access to a guidance councillor to help the young people with planning and decisions for their post-Youthreach education and employment.

In this report we found several challenges facing Youthreach learners. A high proportion of these learners report that they have a long-term medical condition (see Table 1), and the SOLAS report *Key Insights into the Socio-Economic Background of FET Learners 2019*<sup>3</sup> found that Youthreach learners had the third lowest median HP deprivation index of all FET programme categories, indicating that they are likely to be amongst the most disadvantaged Further Education and Training (FET) learners.

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1 The Youthreach programmes delivered at Community Training Centers and their impact will be evidenced in a separate report.

2 [www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/303047/4d5d5746-c064-4f41-9a99-bfa8472bb101.pdf#page=null](https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/303047/4d5d5746-c064-4f41-9a99-bfa8472bb101.pdf#page=null)

3 <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/45b5072653/solas-key-insights-report.pdf>

In a report exploring the increasing importance of transversal skills of FET learners and their readiness for the future world of work, Leargas (2023) found that transversal skills such as confidence and resilience were among those skills deemed top priority, particularly since COVID. Even though the acquisition of these skills is difficult to measure from the administrative data used in this study (PLSS), we did find evidence of improved attitude toward education as a high proportion of Youthreach learners progress to other FET programmes, notably PLCs, after they finish the Youthreach programme. This, we conclude, shows that Youthreach programmes can equip the learners with increased confidence, as well as resilience and adaptability. This finding is also in line with the conclusions of the ESRI report that overall, the programme had been successful in re-engaging early school leavers with education and enhancing personal and social skills, which are key to success in education and in the labour market<sup>4</sup>.

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4 <https://www.esri.ie/publications/evaluation-of-the-national-youthreach-programme>

# Unique learner enrolments 2018–22

In 2018, there were 4,474 unique learner enrolments in the Youthreach programme<sup>5</sup>. This has remained relatively constant over the period 2018–2022, despite the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in a 15% drop in enrolments in 2020, followed by a further 2% drop in 2021 before recovering with a 10% increase in 2022. This relatively small drop in enrolment level over this period contrasts with the fall in enrolments on some other programmes (e.g. enrolments in Community Training Centres fell by 22% in 2020 to 2,118 learners and have continued approximately at that level in 2021 and 2022).

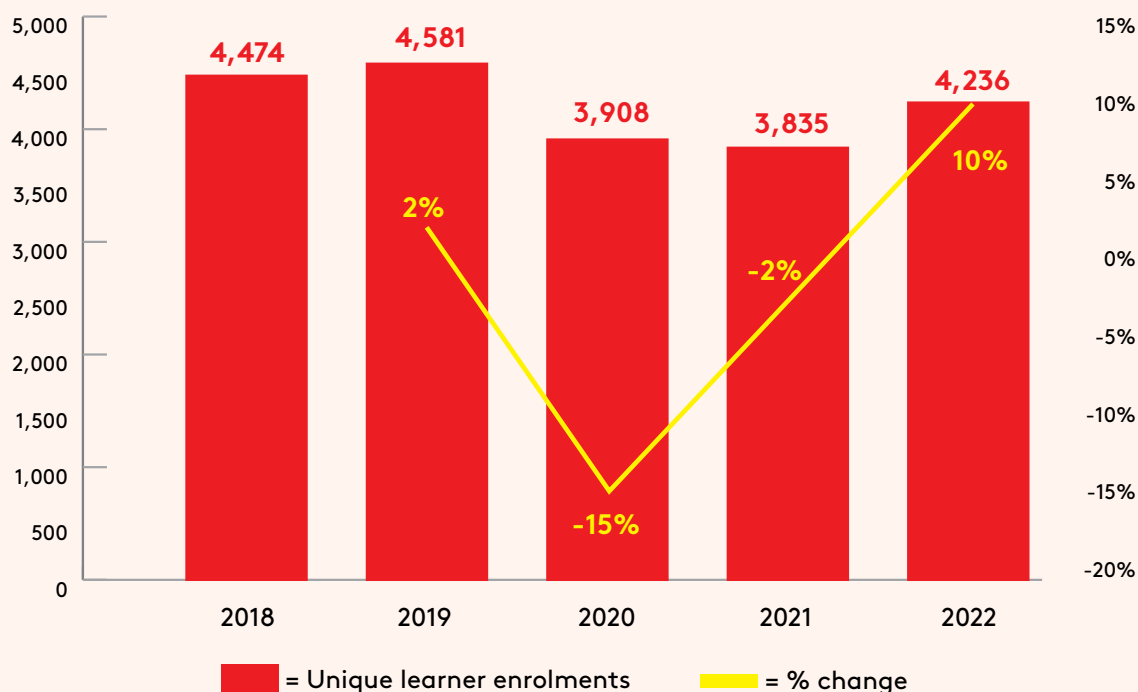


Figure 1. Unique Learner Enrolments

Henceforth, we will focus on Youthreach provision in the year 2022.

<sup>5</sup> We are not counting enrolments at Community Training Centres.

# 1. Learner Profile

## Enrolments 2022

There were 4,236 unique learner enrolments in the Youthreach programme in 2022. Of these enrolments, 2,154 (51%) were male and 2,082 (49%) were female. This gender balance is different to what is observed across the entire FET sector, where 37.9% of learners were male in 2022 and 62.1% of learners were female.

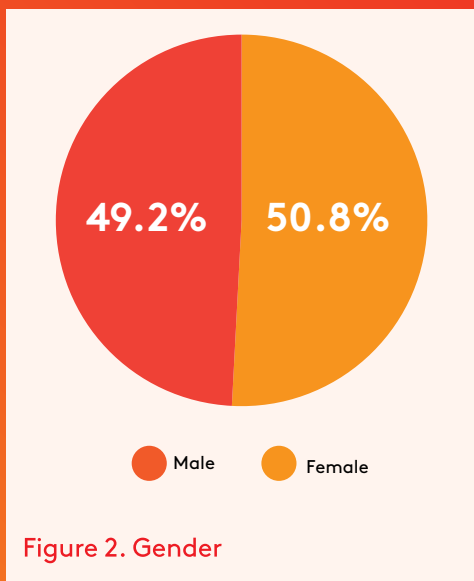


Figure 2. Gender

From Figure 3 we see that most learners (54%) were aged 16 or 17 years.

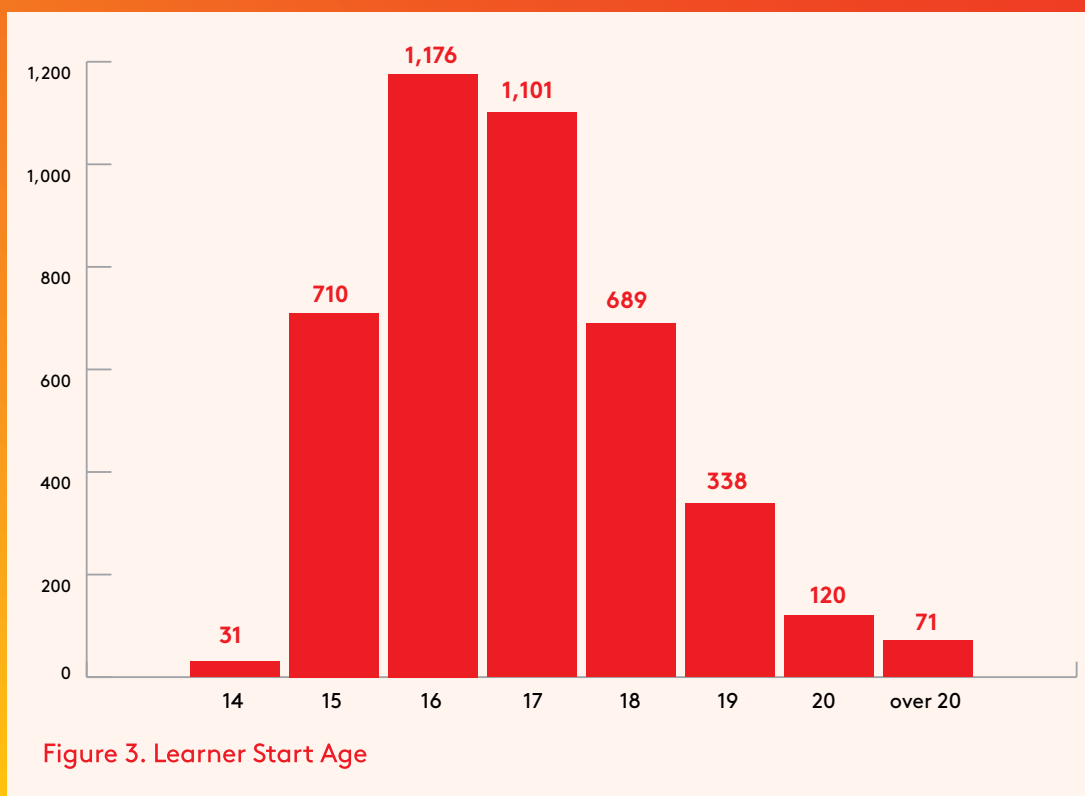
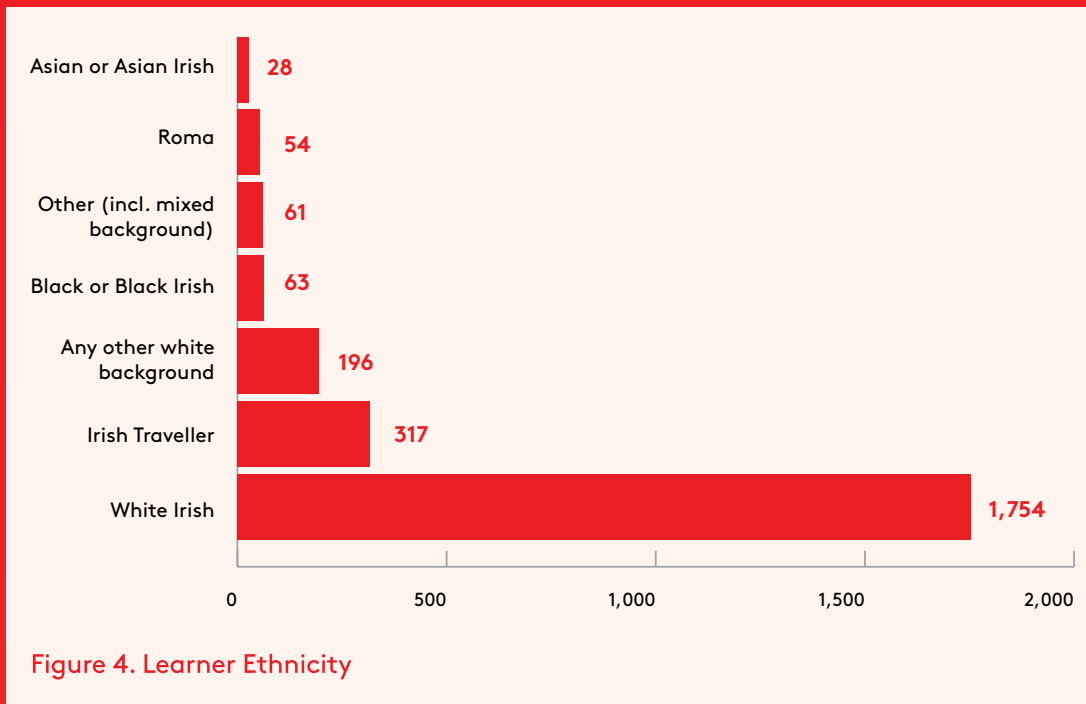


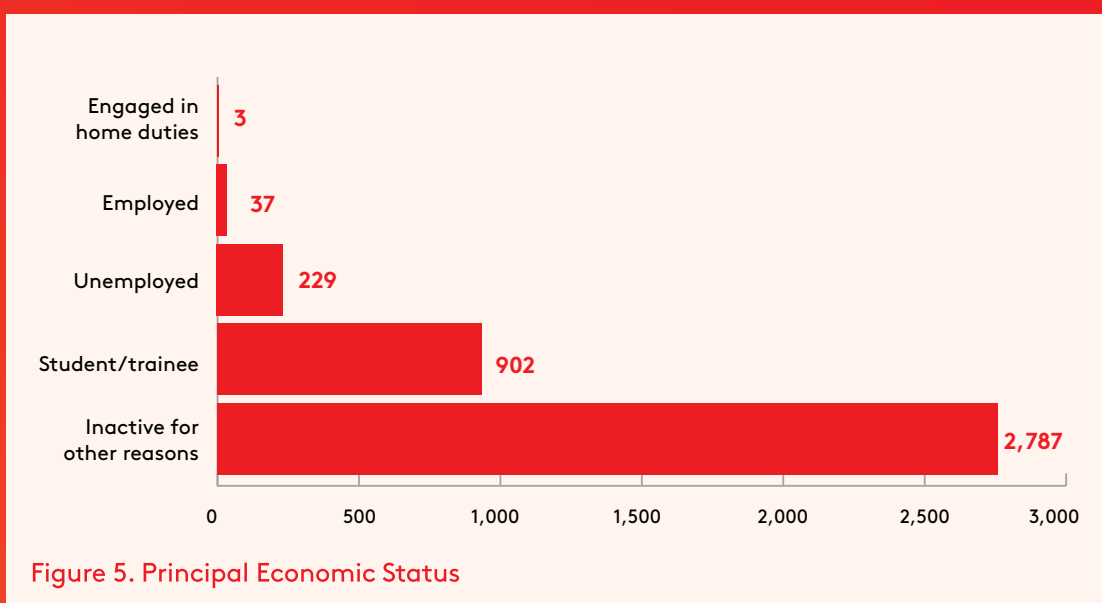
Figure 3. Learner Start Age



Upon application to the Youthreach programme, learners have the option of providing information on their ethnicity<sup>6</sup>. We see from Figure 4 that of those Youthreach learners who provided ethnicity information, 71% (1,754 learners) described themselves as white Irish, 13% (317) as Irish travellers and 2% (54) as Roma.



The principal economic status of the learners is summarised in Figure 5. Among Youthreach enrolments who answered this question, 1% (37 enrolments) were employed, 6% (229) were unemployed, 23% were a student or trainee and 70% were inactive for other reasons<sup>7</sup>. This final figure emphasises the need to provide additional supports, such as the Youthreach programme, to help early school leavers to engage with further education and training or find employment.



<sup>6</sup> The response rate to the ethnicity question was 55%.

<sup>7</sup> The response rate for the principal economic status question was 93%.

**760**

Had a disability/  
long-lasting  
condition

**309**

Dependents  
of welfare  
recipients

**29**

Dependents  
in a jobless  
household

Also, of the 4,236 unique learner enrolments in the Youthreach programme, 760 had a disability, 309 were dependents of a welfare recipient, and 29 were dependents in a jobless household. The distribution of learner disabilities is shown in Table 1.

Disability/Long-lasting condition	Frequency
Other Illness or condition	132
Mobility impairment	30
Intellectual disability	101
Learning or remembering difficulty	466
Vision disability	32
Hearing disability	16
Psychological disability	250

Table 1. Learner disability distribution.  
Note that learners may report having more than one disability type.

## Pobal HP Deprivation index of Youthreach learners in 2022

The Pobal Haase-Pratschke (HP) deprivation index is a metric which scores each census small area (approximately 100 households) on a scale from very affluent to extremely disadvantaged using census information on educational attainment, age profile, employment etc. Since PLSS contains learner addresses, the Youthreach learner enrolments subset of PLSS can be linked to census small areas and the Pobal HP deprivation index. If a learner is from a small area deemed to be disadvantaged, then we infer that the learner is also likely to be disadvantaged.

The cohort of 2022 Youthreach learner enrolments were placed into the following categories by calculation of the Pobal HP deprivation index. Note that the census small areas used, and the HP deprivation index derived from them, correspond to the 2022 census.

HP Index Deprivation Category	% of Learners
Very affluent	0.2
Affluent	5.3
Marginally above average	24.9
Marginally below average	33.3
Disadvantaged	22.3
Very disadvantaged	10.7
Extremely disadvantaged	3.4

**Table 2. HP Deprivation Index**

Inspection of Table 2 clearly shows the tendency for Youthreach learners to come from more disadvantaged areas (their median HP deprivation index score was -5.6). At the launch of the 2022 index, it was noted<sup>8</sup> that 4% of the general population resided in census small areas that were classified as very or extremely disadvantaged. Table 2 reveals that over 14% of the 2022 Youthreach cohort resided in census small areas designated as very or extremely disadvantaged areas. This is in line with previous SOLAS research in *Key Insights into the Socio-Economic Background of FET Learners 2019*<sup>9</sup> that found that Youthreach learners had the third lowest median HP deprivation index of all FET programme categories, indicating that they are likely to be amongst the most disadvantaged FET learners.

8 Further details are available at <https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2023/11/Pobal-HP-Deprivation-Index-Briefing.pdf>

9 <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/45b5072653/solas-key-insights-report.pdf>

# 2. Course Profile

The overwhelming majority of learners (4,225 or 99.7%) were engaged in full-time Youthreach courses, whereas there were only 11 part-time enrolments. Furthermore, most enrolments were classroom based (4,088 enrolments or 96%) compared to blended delivery (148 enrolments or 4%). The distribution of learner fields of study is shown in Figure 6.

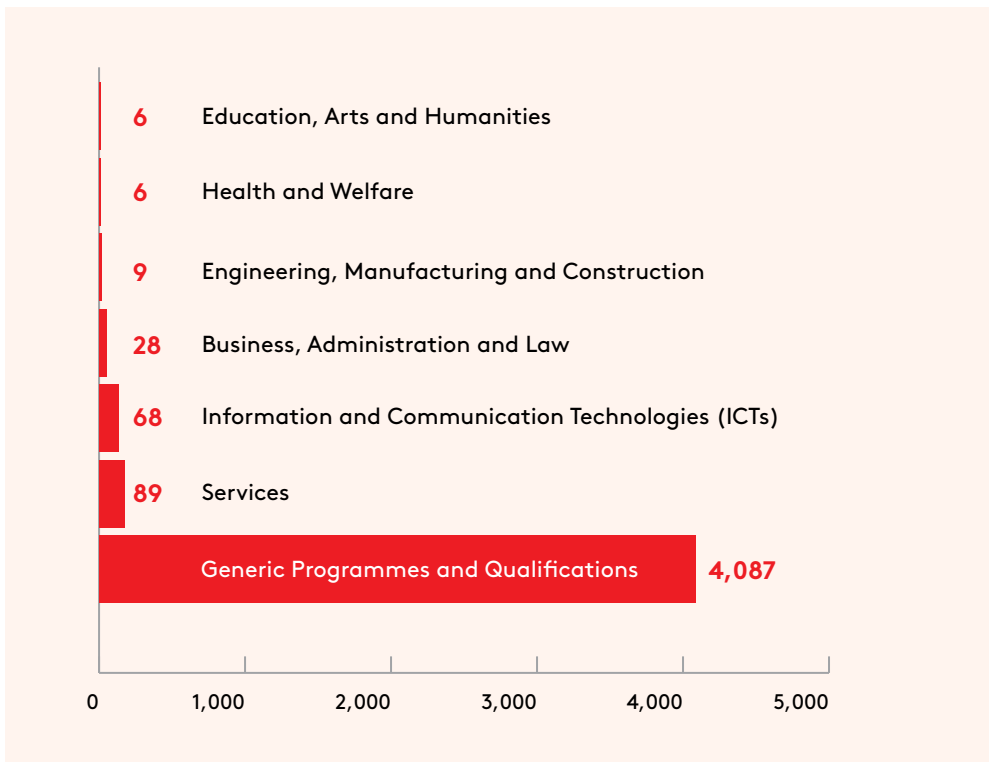


Figure 6. Learner Field of Study (Broad ISCED)

Among ISCED broad fields of study, 95% (4,087) of enrolments were on generic programmes and qualifications in 2022<sup>10</sup>. Some example course titles are shown in Table 3 below.

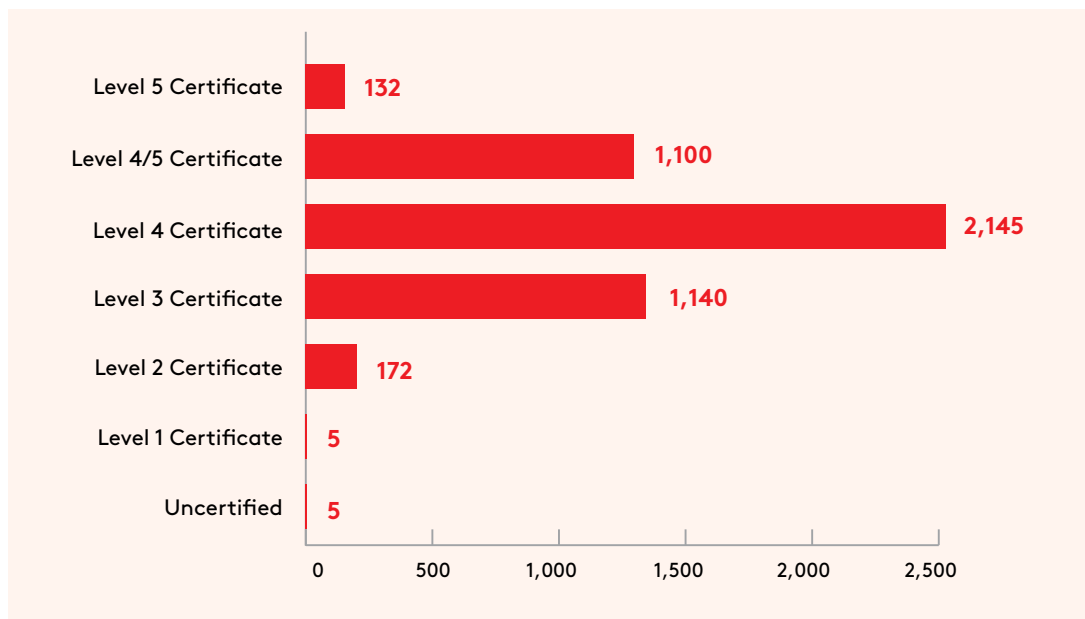
Level	Course title
Level 1 Certificate	General Learning Level 1
Level 2 Certificate	2021/2022 General Learning Level 2
Level 3 Certificate	2021/2022 Employability Skills
	2021/2022 Information and Communication Technologies
	General Learning Level 3
	Junior Certificate Ordinary Level

<sup>10</sup> Learners are unique within each ISCED field of study, but not necessarily across.

Level	Course title
Level 4 Certificate	2021/2022 Information and Communications Technologies Level 4
	General Learning Level 4
	Bridging Skills Programme
	Culinary Skills QQI Level 4
	2022/2023 YRO PLC Access Programme
Level 4/5 Certificate	2021/2022 - Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (Year 1)
	2021/2022 - Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (Year 2)
	Leaving Cert - 5th Year - Ordinary Level
	Leaving Cert - 6th Year - Ordinary Level
Level 5 Certificate	Beauty Therapy Level 5
	College Access Programme in Multi-Media
	Customer Service
	Fast Track to Information Technology (FIT)
	Hairdressing Level 5
	Business Studies
	General Learning Level 5

**Table 3. Examples of courses offered**

The distribution of course award levels is displayed in Figure 7, where we see that 72% (3,377) of enrolments were on courses at Level 4, Level 4/5 (Leaving Certificate) or Level 5 Certificates<sup>11</sup>.



**Figure 7. NFQ Award Levels**

<sup>11</sup> Learners are unique within each award level but not necessarily across award levels.

# Learner Completions and Certifications

Of the 4,236 Youthreach unique learner enrolments, 2,454 learners were full or partial completions, (defined as those learners who had a course finish date in 2022 and who were not early leavers), see Figure 8 below, yielding a completion rate of 80%.

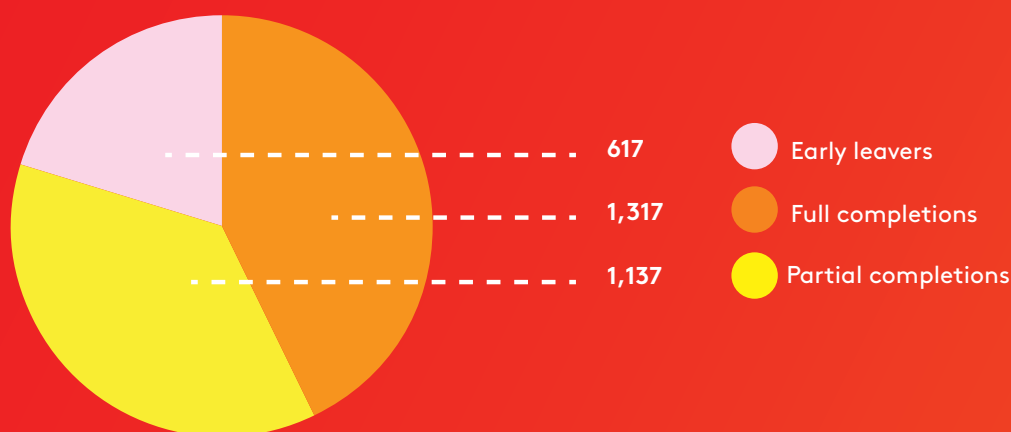


Figure 8. Unique Learner Completions

Of these 2,454 learner completions, 2,373 were certified completions. The distribution of certification outcomes is presented in Figure 9. The certification rate (the number of full and partial certifications divided by the total number of certified completions) was 78%. This should be compared to the national certification rate across all programmes of 71% (published in SOLAS’s FET Facts & Figures 2022 report).

An ESRI report on Youthreach using survey data in 2017 highlighted the difficulty in capturing programme ‘completions’ in the administrative system (FARR) used at that time, since not all learners remain for two years and progress from one qualification level to another. They speculated that this may lead some centre managers/coordinators to view them as non-completions.

Our findings, based instead on PLSS, allow for the counting of full and partial completions and certifications and are at the granularity of individual courses/NFQ award levels. Thus, for example, when we speak of a full completion we are referring to the full completion of a Youthreach course and not of the (two year) Youthreach programme.

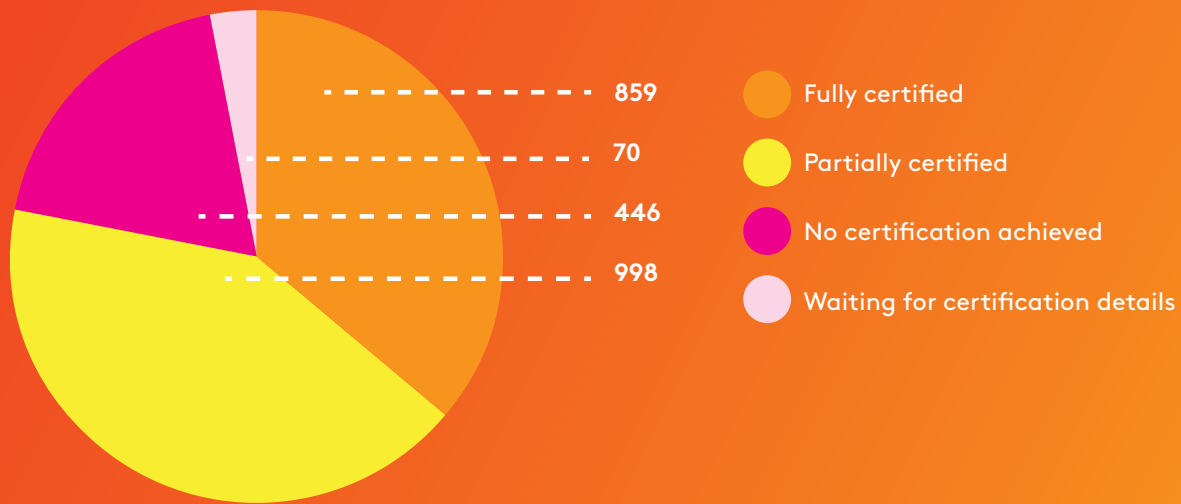


Figure 9. Certified Completions

In Table 4 below the number of certified completions (full or partial) by award level is presented.

Certified Completions by Award Level	Learners	%
Level 2 Certificate	78	4%
Level 3 Certificate	404	22%
Level 4 Certificate	843	45%
Level 4/5 Certificate	477	26%
Level 5 Certificate	55	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,857</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 4. Certified Completions by Award Level

From the table we see that 74% of certified completions were at Level 4 or higher.

# 3. Geographical Distribution of Learners

Youthreach programmes are offered in each of the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs).

ETB	Learners
Cavan and Monaghan ETB	185
City of Dublin ETB	632
Cork ETB	502
Donegal ETB	160
Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETB	403
Galway and Roscommon ETB	262
Kerry ETB	144
Kildare and Wicklow ETB	267
Kilkenny and Carlow ETB	83
Laois and Offaly ETB	157
Limerick and Clare ETB	355
Longford and Westmeath ETB	124
Louth and Meath ETB	320
Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim ETB	195
Tipperary ETB	95
Waterford and Wexford ETB	378

**Table 5. Learner count in each ETB**

Table 5 shows that of the 4,236 unique learners enrolled in the Youthreach programme, enrolments were spread over the entire ETB network, with the largest number of enrolments concentrated in the more densely populated areas such as Dublin and Cork<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Note that learners are unique within ETBs but not necessarily across ETBs.



## Distance Travelled by Learners to their Youthreach Centre

PLSS contains data on learners' addresses and the addresses of Youthreach centres in a form (longitude and latitude) convenient for the calculation of ('straight-line') distance travelled. Note that of the 4,236 learners enrolled in Youthreach in 2022, we had geocoded addresses for 3,263 learners.

In Figure 10 we present the median one-way straight-line distances travelled by learners to their Youthreach centre in 2022, based on address data in PLSS, in the form of a venues heatmap, with larger and darker markers corresponding to further distances travelled.

The median distance travelled by learners to their Youthreach centre was 2.5km. Unsurprisingly, learners travelling to rural centres tend to travel much larger distances than those learners travelling to urban centres such as those in Dublin or Cork. Four venues had a median distance travelled of greater than 20km and the venue with the maximum distance travelled was Portumna Youthreach, at 26.9km.



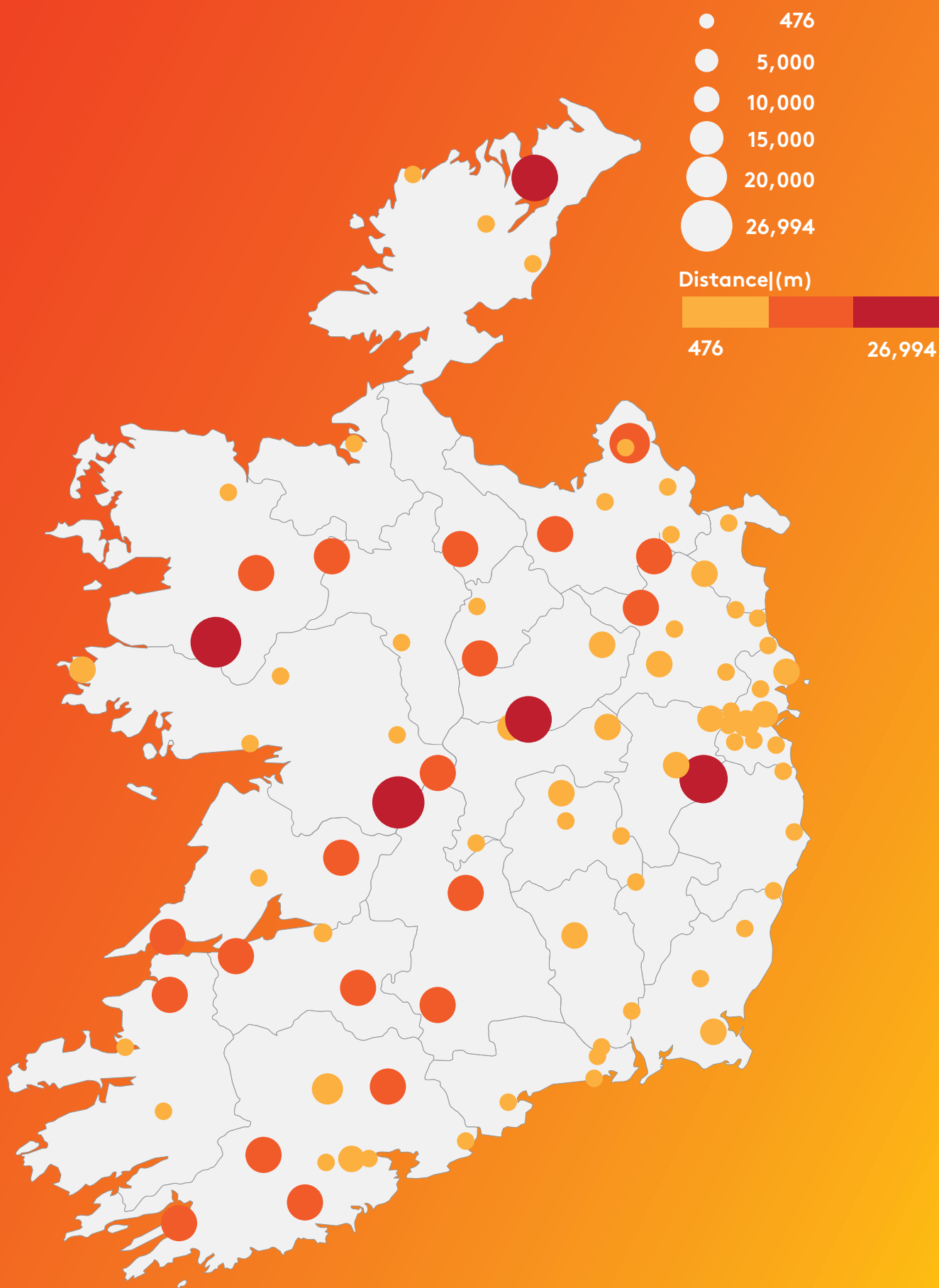


Figure 10. Median distance travelled to Youthreach centres

In Table 6 below, we present the median distance travelled by learners to their Youthreach centre by QQI award level.

Award Level	Median Distance (m)
Level 1 Certificate	1,378
Level 2 Certificate	2,225
Level 3 Certificate	2,185
Level 4 Certificate	2,683
Level 4/5 Certificate	2,864
Level 5 Certificate	2,707
Transition Link Work Experience	19,501

**Table 6. Median distance travelled by award level**

From Table 6, we see that learners travel a median distance of 1.4 km for Level 1 courses whilst the maximum median distance travelled for a certified course is for Level 4/5 (Leaving Certificate courses) at 2.9 km. A small number of learners travel much further (a median distance of 19.5 km) to enrol in the (uncertified) Transition Link Work Experience Programme offered by Limerick Clare ETB.

# 4. Outcomes: Pathways beyond Youthreach

Of the 2,454 learners who were full or partial completers of a course in Youthreach in 2022<sup>13</sup>, 929 learners (38%) started another FET course after leaving Youthreach by the end of 2023.

In Figure 11 we present a Sankey diagram to visualise the destinations of these 929 learners. The column on the right represents the programme category with the highest award level that the learner enrolled in after Youthreach by the end of 2023. We can see that 53% (492) of these learners enrolled in PLCs after Youthreach.

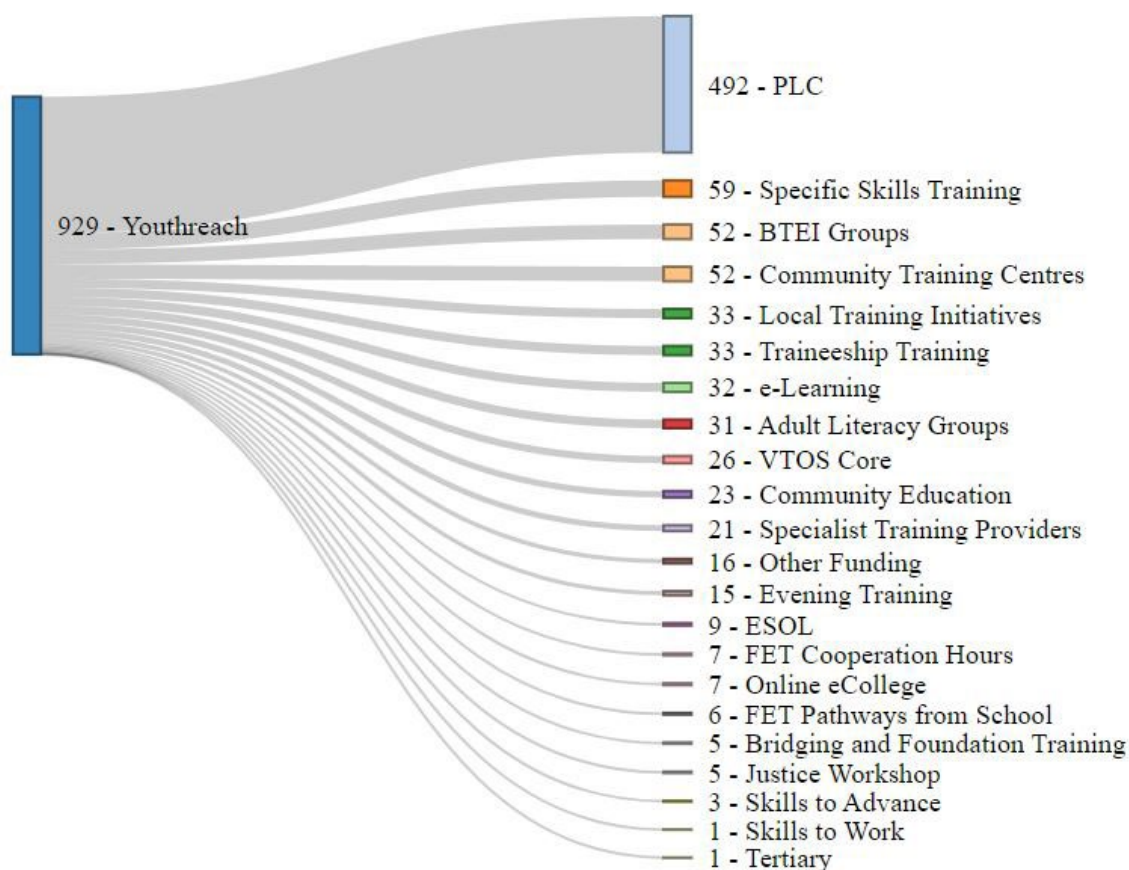
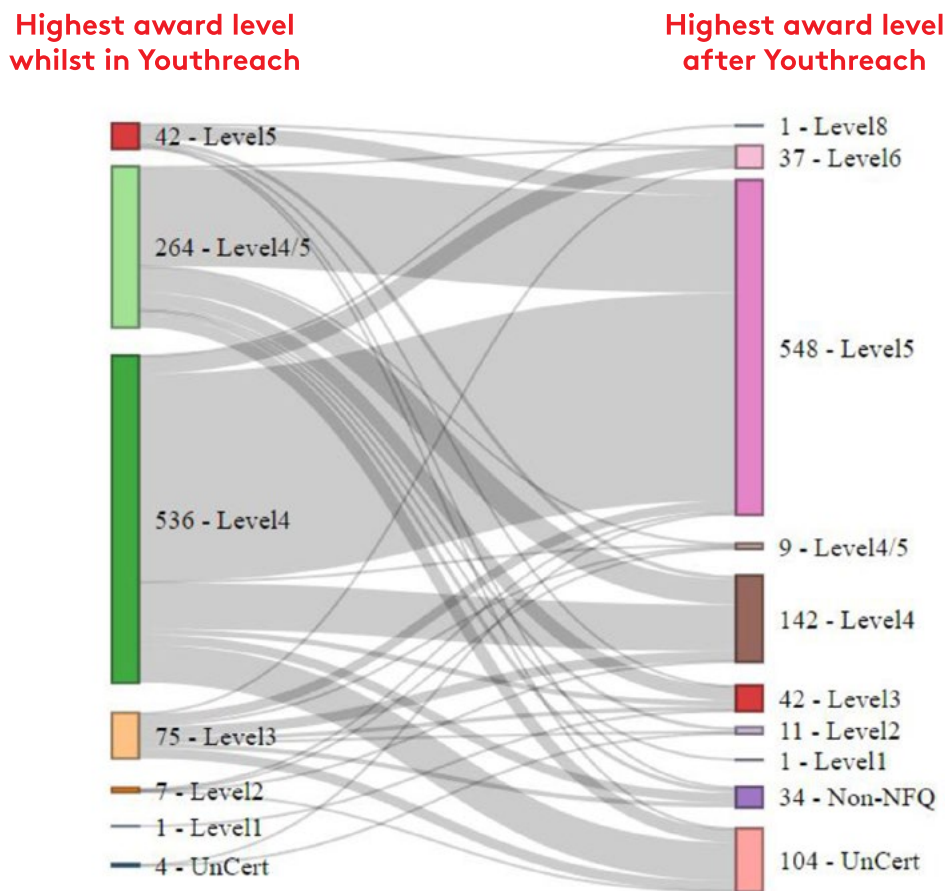


Figure 11. The programme categories with the highest award level that learners enrolled in after Youthreach

<sup>13</sup> We again emphasise that we refer to completers of a course in Youthreach and not the two-year Youthreach programme.

Figure 12 below summarises, by award level, the path taken by learners who were full or partial completers from their highest award level within Youthreach, to their highest award level after Youthreach, up to the end of December 2023. We can clearly see that most learners move to courses at the same or higher award level.



**Figure 12. Pathways from learners' highest award level within Youthreach to their highest award level after Youthreach**

For example, of the 536 completers whose highest award level whilst in Youthreach was at NFQ Level 4, 14% (76 learners) had a highest award level in FET after Youthreach during this period also at Level 4, whilst 69% (372 learners) transitioned to a Level 4/5, Level 5, Level 6 or Level 8 (tertiary) course. The remaining 16% (88 learners) transitioned to a course at a lower NFQ level or a non-NFQ Aligned FET course or an uncertified course.

Figures 11 and 12 summarise the post-Youthreach outcomes of full and partial completers of a Youthreach course in 2022. If we instead consider those who were early leavers of a Youthreach course in 2022 (617 learners), we found that 26% (163 learners) enrolled in another FET course up to the end of 2023 and 28% of these courses were PLCs. This indicates that completers of a Youthreach course were more likely to transition to higher award level FET courses after Youthreach than those who were early leavers. It is important to note that some learners leave for positive reasons, such as to take up employment, and we have not analysed this group further (the ESRI report in 2017 found using survey data that 27% of those who completed the programme took up employment directly).

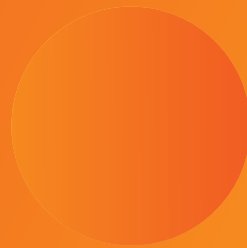
# Conclusion

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The Youthreach programme provides second-chance access to education for early school leavers. We have found that these learners are likely to be amongst the most marginalised young people in Irish society. Despite the challenges they face, the certification rate of Youthreach learners is above the national average for FET learners. An earlier study, which interviewed Youthreach learners, noted the positive impact that the programme was having on the attitudes of learners to education.

We also found evidence for an increased willingness to engage with education. Of the 2,454 learners who fully or partially completed a course in 2022, 929 enrolled in another FET programme by the end of 2023 and over 50% of these learners were on PLC courses. This suggests that the Youthreach programme is having a significant positive impact on the lives of these young people which may persist long into the future.





# Definition of Terms

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## Activity

The sum of learners multiplied by the number of courses which they have been enrolled in or completed within a programme or across different programmes, or providers during 2022.

## Certified Completions

In the FET sector, not all learner completions lead to an award through a recognised awarding body in the FET sector. Therefore, certified completions refer only to the total number of certified completions in 2022.

## Certification Rate

The proportion of full and partial learner completions who achieved certification to all learners who completed a certified course in 2022.

## Completions

Total number of learners who have a finish date of a course (regardless of whether the course is certified or not) in 2022. Completions include partial and full completers but exclude early leavers.

## Enrolments

Enrolments are defined as learners who are on course or have completed a course during 2022.

## Field of Study

This is defined and categorised by the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). Both broad (2-digit) and detailed (4-digit) fields of study are used for categorising Further Education and Training course fields of study.

## Full Completions

Learners who have completed 90 per cent or more of the course and its requirements in 2022.

## Inactive

This term is used according to the Eurostat and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) definition which defines inactive as individuals who are neither employed nor unemployed and are not working and not available or looking for work.



### **Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)**

This is a framework through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way. The many different types and sizes of qualifications included in the NFQ are organised based on their level of knowledge, skill and competence.

### **Learner**

A unique individual who has progressed onto a course in the application process. The total number of learners is the sum of all unique individuals in Further Education and Training in 2022.

### **Non-NFQ Aligned courses**

This includes completions with certification not aligned with the NFQ.

### **On Course**

This refers to those learners who were still on course at a point in time.

### **Partial Completions**

Learners who have completed more than 25 percent but less than 90 percent of a course and its requirements in 2022.



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